Sociomateriality — taking the wrong turning? A response to Mutch

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Let us begin by saying that we value a plurality of theoretical approaches in the academy generally, and especially welcome the multiple engagements that have been energized by a line of inquiry termed "sociomateriality" in information systems and organizations research. Indeed, our interest in pursuing these ideas has been to broaden horizons and open up debate rather than mark off turf or close down avenues of thought. We were inspired in this regard by an inclusive tradition in science studies made prominent by Donna Haraway and followed through by Karen Barad. They refer to this as a diffractive methodology: the practice of reading insights through one another, staying open and mindful to generative patterns of difference and possibilities.

The motivation behind our exploration of sociomateriality is the belief, shared with many, that the complex challenges in the world overflow any one disciplinary or theoretical approach. For us, approaches that question, re-examine, and move beyond established dichotomies are to be welcomed, investigated, and learned from. We were thus taken aback by the apparent exclusion of sociomateriality from this research undertaking by colleagues whom we had looked upon as potential fellow travellers in the journey through subtle realism. However, our unease was brief because upon further investigation we realized (no pun intended) that although one might imagine the critical realist community to be close after years of laboring on their shared theoretical project, it is characterized by a discourse that routinely "corrects" ontological "errors" in each other's work. As this is not our preferred mode of engagement, we have focused our comments here within a more familiar developmental project, replete (no doubt) with its flaws, but open we hope to the creation of opportunities for questioning and re-experiencing ideas.

Critique by Proxy

In the opening lines of his commentary on our work, "Sociomateriality – taking the wrong turning?" Mutch refers to "the material *in* social and organizational life" (Mutch p. 2, our emphasis). In so doing, he both highlights the extent to which he misses the point of sociomateriality and provides a starting point for our response because agential realism is a break with the dichotomy established by naïve realism and social constructivism, both of which retain commitments to separatism and representationalism.

With respect to separatism, Mutch claims agential realism is not useful for studying "the combinations of the social and the material" (ibid. p. 2, 11), or of examining the "nature" of "material properties" (ibid. p. 22). *Precisely!* Agential realism is not useful here. Its ontology is explicitly opposed to viewing the social and material as separate, and assuming that properties and boundaries are inherent. In precluding considerations of separate entities, their combinations, and their inherent properties, agential realism is doing its job. Its presumptions of non-separability ("entanglement") and non-essentialism ("indeterminacy") make it unsuitable to studying the "impacts" of technology or how technology "inscribes" aspects of social structure (ibid. p. 22). In this we agree with Mutch, but *pace* Mutch, this is not a weakness of agential realism but its strength. By providing an ontological position and theoretical apparatus for examining entanglement and enactment, agential realism offers conceptual and analytical traction for making sense of the world and its possibilities in new ways. To ground this in an example from our field study in the travel sector, TripAdvisor distinguishes itself on its website as: "… the most popular and largest travel community in the world, with … 36 million marketable members." This phenomenon can be investigated from multiple perspectives, but poses challenges for approaches that are premised on identifying bounded social systems and technologies with discrete properties. In particular, where would they locate "36 million marketable members," given that there is no such thing as "marketable members" separate

from networks, relational databases and algorithms? A sociomaterial perspective would focus on the specific details of the apparatus that produces "marketable members" through the entangling of 60 postings/minute, relational databases, algorithms, and multiple revenue opportunities in Internet-worked economies.

Focusing on defining turns, rather than "wrong turnings" means being prepared to depart from representationalism — the notion that the world is brought into being by humans who go about knowing and naming observation-independent objects with attributes. This is what we have attempted in our research on ranking and rating in the travel sector; instead of seeing the algorithmic media of TripAdvisor as a mirror of conscious socio-technical choices — a snapshot produced from a passive collage of human intention — we have reframed it as a highly specific, active, partial, generative (performative) engine involved in re-making the world of travel (see MacKenzie 2006, also Haraway 1991). Barad's move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices, doings, and actions. Practices from this perspective are not tasks undertaken by people in roles, but material-discursive practices enacted through apparatus that simultaneously constitute and organize phenomena.

Mutch focuses a large part of his discussion to critiquing a first generation of papers that draw upon Barad's ideas. He observes that these fail to be specific about materiality and ignore broader social structures, and then argues that these problems are inherent in and foundational to Barad's agential realism (ibid. p. 11). This argument — what we might term a critique by proxy — is problematic, as it claims fundamental difficulties with Barad's work by examining work done by others. Given that work by others (including our own) could quite easily draw on poor interpretations or applications of Barad's ideas, it cannot constitute credible evidence against the original. In a court of law, such an argument would be dismissed as "hearsay." To make credible claims about Barad's formulations requires serious and active engagement with her work, so that it can be interpreted and judged on its own terms.

When Mutch does discuss Barad's work (pp. 15-16), it is to offer an outline of a few of her concepts and then criticize them for inadequately dealing with two ideas that are central to critical realism: emergence and stratification, and structure and agency (ibid. p. 12). He then finds — not surprisingly given his starting point — that agential realism does not offer the same resources for addressing these issues as does critical realism. In developing agential realism, Barad's agenda has never been to offer a blueprint for "how to carry out concrete social analysis" (ibid. p. 16). Berating agential realism for supplying "a shaky foundation" to social science (ibid. p. 17) is simply misplaced. Suggesting as much is akin to censuring critical realism for offering a shaky foundation to geological analysis.

Extending his strategy of critique by proxy, Mutch criticizes Barad's interpretation of Niels Bohr's theories by appealing to Christopher Norris' review of quantum physics. In particular, Mutch admonishes Barad for developing agential realism on the basis of a theory of quantum physics that is "open and contested" (ibid. p. 17). But what theory is ever closed and incontrovertible? That would not make it theory, but dogma. Mutch does not clarify why Norris' view of quantum theories should be privileged over Barad's. Perhaps it is because the former offers a critical realist account? An alternative approach would be to accept multiple views of quantum physics as instances of debate, with Norris's interpretations useful for informing critical realist accounts, and those of Barad useful for informing agential realist accounts. This would embrace an open dialogue across different perspectives, rather than shutting down particular lines of inquiry.

Critique by Exclusion

Mutch argues that sociomateriality represents "a wrong turning," and in various places describes it as weak, neglectful, and perverse, involving illicit moves that are grounded in confused, contradictory, and preposterous notions. But he does not explain why his (critical realist) perspective and criteria should be *the* arbiter of what constitutes strong, appropriate, legitimate research moves. It is also not clear why he assumes that there is one "right" path for studies of information systems, and that he knows what and where it is. This level of critique opts for exclusionary declarations over engaging with what the work is trying to achieve. Rather than recognizing and respecting a plurality of approaches and discussing their relative usefulness for different questions and conditions, the exercise becomes one of calling out how a perspective falls short of a certain set of measures that are simply taken as given. Haraway referred to this device as the "god trick" — presenting points of view as "ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively" (1991, p. 193).

Mutch suggests that sociomateriality is not adequate for investigating large, data intensive enterprise systems (ibid. p. 2, 11). But making this judgment on the basis of a few initial sociomaterial studies seems somewhat premature. A larger body of evidence would surely be necessary before declaring sociomateriality to be ill-suited for the purpose of studying enterprise systems. As a theoretical apparatus for studying information systems, sociomateriality is in its infancy, as we have indicated elsewhere (Orlikowski and Scott 2008, p. 456). Mutch acknowledges this when he notes that sociomateriality is in "the early stage of development" (ibid. p. 7), but then rather inconsistently complains that work in this area does not offer "a full-blown sociomaterial perspective" (ibid. p. 9).

There is more than a little irony in Mutch pointing out the somewhat colourful heritage and diversity of challenges in parsing agential realism, when critical realism has taken its own wild ride through Naturalism, Marxism, Theology, and Transcendentalism, and enjoyed its own share of literary intensity, interpretive difficulty, and internal complexity (if not contradiction) along the way. Indeed Mutch notes that there is "a healthy level of debate among critical realists about how the fundamental concepts are to be applied" (ibid. p. 21). But he seems unwilling to value or extend the same courtesy to corresponding levels of difference and openness in writings on sociomateriality.

We have always argued for theoretical inclusivity, maintaining that sociomateriality is one of a palette of approaches that researchers might consider working with to study the world (Orlikowski and Scott 2008, p. 434). Mutch appears to prefer a kind of theoretical exclusivity by arguing for the need to sideline sociomateriality and agential realism by moving forward with critical realism and socio-technical studies instead. He writes, "There can be value, that is, in refreshing existing perspectives rather than seeking new ones" (ibid. p. 26). We agree about the potential for refreshing existing approaches, but cannot agree with — or fathom — a rationale that would close down new explorations.

There is no doubt value in continuing to explore socio-technical studies as Mutch argues. Just as there is value in pursuing critical realism to investigate information systems and organizations. But why would following these directions preclude engaging in work on sociomateriality and agential realism? Somehow Mutch believes that developing sociomaterial ideas will inhibit or threaten work in different philosophical and theoretical registers (his idea of "a wrong turning"). But research does not work this way. Even a quick look at the history of research in information systems should allay Mutch's fears. Indeed, one of the more welcome developments in this field over the past decades has been the plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches used. We think this is

appropriate and generative. The world is always underdetermined by theory so that a multiplicity of perspectives is not only valuable but indispensible in helping us make sense of it.

Addressing tensions and managing boundaries with siblings is an ongoing project, so perhaps we should not be surprised that members of the critical realist community have railed at sociomateriality. Whether they choose to productively explore it or not, critical realists and agential realists share areas of undeniable and important common interest — a repudiation of naïve realism, a shift away from social constructivism, and an engagement with the question: What makes knowledge possible? For a scholar committed to critical realism, Mutch curiously restricts the conditions and possibilities of knowledge making rather than explores these as practical limits that might be overcome. We see no reason why critical realism and agential realism cannot work alongside each other, exploring information systems and organizations phenomena through shared commitments to subtle realism — joining in conversation rather than raising up slingshots.

The challenge and opportunity is to turn unsettled and unsettling ideas into inspiration, and differences into analytical edge for deepening understanding so that we might understand the world anew. It flows from this that ruling out novel perspectives and stifling innovation is likely to undermine any field of study. To issue restraining orders on academic views is debilitating, if not deadening. To the extent that there is such a thing as a "wrong turning" in scholarship it is marked by lack of curiosity and shutting down of ideas. Calls to turn away from fresh approaches reinforce other trends that concern us in the academy, joining forces with rankings that reactively discipline us and editorial practices that define inclusions and exclusions. If there is a measure of healthy scholarship then it is surely our capacity to sustain the conditions that foster openness and experimentation in the framing and doing of our research endeavours.

In his conclusion, Mutch warns that "There are implications associated with the use of the term [sociomateriality], if we are to be true to its original conceptualisation, which might not be welcomed by those who are deploying the term to draw attention to the importance of the material" (ibid. p. 24). We would counter by asking scholars engaged in studies of information systems and organizations — whatever theory they find works best for the research they pursue — to support the longstanding tradition that has motivated us and which Barad (2011, p. 450) describes as scholarship that:

> … focuses on the possibilities of making a better world, a livable world, a world based on values of co-flourishing and mutuality, not fighting and diminishing one another, not closing one another down, but helping to open up our ideas and ourselves to each other and to new possibilities, which with any luck will have the potential to help us see our way through to a world that is more livable, not for some, but for the entangled wellbeing of all.

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